

# Reaching the Summit:

## Deaf Adults as Essential Partners in Education

**Bridgetta Bourne-**

**Firl**, MS, is assistant director of Training, Products, and Dissemination at the Laurent Clerc National Deaf Education Center on the Gallaudet University campus in Washington, D.C. Prior to coming to the Clerc Center, she worked in outreach for 27 years, including at Gallaudet University, serving the nation through the National Academy, and at an outreach/resource center serving families and school professionals in Northern California. She has worked at schools in California, Maryland, and Washington, D.C. Bourne-Firl welcomes questions and comments about this article at [Bridgetta.Bourne-Firl@gallaudet.edu](mailto:Bridgetta.Bourne-Firl@gallaudet.edu).

By Bridgetta Bourne-Firl

*It can be tough, but it is important to convince decision-making professionals who are hearing to consult with and involve deaf adults in deaf education and the transition of deaf and hard of hearing students from school into higher education, postsecondary training, or the workplace—always.*

Tibetan-born Sherpa Nawang Gombu and American Jim Whittaker reached the top of Mount Everest on May 1, 1963. As they approached the peak, each considered the honor of being the first to reach the summit.

Whittaker motioned for Gombu to move ahead, but Gombu declined with a smile saying, "You first." The two climbers decided to step to the summit at the same time (Douglas, 2011).



**Right:** Gombu and Whittaker, photo courtesy of [www.cnn.com](http://www.cnn.com) (Strickland, 2013).

I would like to think that Whittaker, not native to the rugged landscape that surrounds the tallest mountain in the world, encouraged Gombu, who was native to the area, to go first because it was the right thing to do. Then it was the native Tibetan who chose to partner with the American, who did not know the terrain or how to navigate within it, in sharing the honor of reaching the summit.

How do we reach the summit in terms of supporting the best transition possible for each

Photos courtesy of Bridgetta Bourne-Firl and Zhou Fang



PHOTO CREDIT: BEN HOSHINA

young deaf or hard of hearing individual in the United States? Should professionals who are hearing work alone to succeed with deaf and hard of hearing students? No matter how good the intention, if we want deaf and hard of hearing students to transition from high school to college, university, or the workplace with maximum ease, involving adults who are deaf or hard of hearing is critical.

Ideally, the partnership between deaf and hearing professionals begins at the birth of each deaf child and continues as the child moves through schooling and transitions into adulthood. The evidence for the importance of this involvement comes from many sources, including hearing parents and professionals. “I don’t know how to teach my child how to be a deaf adult in this world,” one hearing parent explained to me. “So the professionals who are deaf themselves teach my child how to navigate as a deaf person.”

Dr. Hank Klopping, a former superintendent of a school for the deaf who retired after 38 years as one of the most respected administrators in the country, exemplifies this attitude. Deaf professionals often know best for deaf students because their perspectives are naturally enhanced by their own experiences and by the collective knowledge of what other deaf individuals have experienced. As an

administrator, Klopping embraced collaborative governance that included deaf individuals, deaf parents, and deaf professionals, and he communicated effectively with all of them. His ongoing relationships with deaf individuals ensured quality education for the deaf and hard of hearing individuals who had the good fortune to be educated while he was an administrator in their school.

Klopping, who is not deaf, is an example of a hearing individual who genuinely recognized his shared humanity and equality with deaf individuals, understood that they offered effective educational approaches, acknowledged the implicit discrimination that deaf individuals have endured historically, and worked actively to confront and counteract this. Deaf people considered him an ally, using this term to mean individuals who collaborate equally with deaf individuals in the name of a larger cause. When skilled and knowledgeable deaf individuals are unavailable, skilled and knowledgeable hearing allies can be useful.

### **Birth: The Partnering Begins**

In hospitals, newborns are tested for hearing status. The result is that often the first deaf person parents

**Left to right:**  
Bourne-Firl and her husband with their newborn; the author's family (clockwise from left): Jared, Gideon, Bridgetta, Leslie, Sabrina, and Elijah; Bourne-Firl and her son share a happy moment.



meet is the baby in their arms. At this point, well-meaning professionals often present the parents with the information about their baby's hearing status in language and tone that are negative. For example, when I was told my child failed a hearing test, it was clear that the context was negative. My baby was not yet 48 hours old and the first evaluation I received was "failed." No wonder distress and anxiety, even alarm, result. If a deaf person or a hearing professional who partners equally and successfully with deaf people could be in the hospital corridor at that moment, parents could be assured of the positive experiences that await their child, and the professional could begin to assist parent and baby with bonding and language development.

In Maryland, an attempt has been made to address this issue through the state's Early Hearing Detection and Intervention Advisory Council. This council comprises 12 individuals, including representatives from the Maryland School for the Deaf, the Maryland Association of the Deaf, the Alexander Graham Bell Association for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing, and the Joint Committee on Infant Hearing. Dr. Beth Benedict, herself a deaf parent and an intervention expert, was among the representatives. The council ensures further meaningful input through

requiring representation from two parents of children "with permanent hearing status that affects speech-language skills." Critical to respecting the Deaf community is the use of the words "hearing status" instead of "hearing loss," phrasing that was the contribution of deaf professionals and individuals. This is an excellent example of partnership, fostering a positive start for parents with newly identified deaf or hard of hearing babies.

### Educational and Professional Experience: An Autobiography

I was in school when the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act passed in 1975. I experienced Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings with my parents, who were adamant in advocating goals that were challenging in reading, writing, and math. They wanted me to progress just like my hearing counterparts—and they knew I could. When the teachers were unsure, my parents, who were deaf like me, insisted they have higher expectations and that those expectations be written into my IEP. When I was in high school, I participated in my youngest sister's IEP meeting as an observer, watching the interactions and explanations of teachers and my parents.

In 1996, I began working in infant

through grade 12 educational settings, first in California, then Maryland, and now in the District of Columbia. For 20 years, I have worked with deaf and hard of hearing students in educational settings and observed as other people worked with them. In a professional capacity, I had an opportunity to serve as an IEP coordinator, and some of the IEP meetings I witnessed worried me. Clearly the other professionals with so much power over the lives of young children had no idea what it was like being deaf, what it was like wearing hearing aids, what it was like to struggle understanding teachers.

Sometimes I was the only deaf professional in attendance, and I would offer my opinion from my own experience and knowledge. I was always hoping that the team would pay attention, that my words could support this student's IEP planning, and I would shake my head in silence when decisions were made with too much focus on things that I thought would not necessarily contribute to the student's academic growth. I often wished the hearing professionals would ask me, "What do you think? You are a deaf person yourself and have seen so much. Please advise." This did not always happen.

I became a parent. I would have four children—two who were hearing and two who were deaf. When I had my second deaf baby, a little girl, the professionals, administrators for our school district, asked me what I wanted in her Individualized Family Service Plan. Due to my strong emotions—I wanted so badly to invest the right way in planning for my daughter—I struggled to come up with a written statement. I consulted a professional with expertise in early childhood education for deaf children, and this individual gave me confidence as well as knowledge. When I met with the district administrators for the second time, I knew what to write: My child should be kindergarten ready by the time she is 5 years old; further, she

should have a high level of language modeling in both American Sign Language and English. As a result, my daughter had professionals—deaf, hard of hearing, and hearing—who were supportive of her progress academically and socially and, thankfully, my daughter was indeed ready when she started her wonderful kindergarten program.

During my early years as a parent, Barbara Matusky, a hearing mother of two deaf children, told me, “When it comes to our children, we are emotional beings. Period.” That’s parenthood. Whether we are deaf or hearing—or they are deaf or hearing—we love our children so much and are anxious to ensure they prosper. All parents are thankful to those who contribute to the academic growth of their children.

## Pepnet 2, Transition, and Adulthood ... and Deaf Gain

Last year, I had the privilege of serving as one of the meeting facilitators at the pepnet 2 Summit that was held in Washington, D.C. Pepnet 2, formerly PEPNet, a project funded by the U.S. Department of Education, has brought together professionals, parents, and deaf people from around the country in a series of meetings known as Summits to focus on statewide planning to improve the transition of young deaf and hard of hearing students into adulthood. The pepnet 2 teams have required the inclusion of parents and individuals from the Deaf community. This is an important step. Through their personal knowledge and experience, these deaf adults can contribute to the lives of deaf young adults so they become contributing citizens, whether they go directly into the workplace or enter

college, law school, or trade school and whether they are living independently or in group homes.

At the California School for the Deaf in Fremont, job coaching, by knowledgeable deaf or hearing allies working closely with deaf adult individuals, is provided for students for two years after leaving high school. Coaches work with families in their homes, with employers at job sites, and with individuals in local communities to find the resources to support young graduates.

Dr. Ben Bahan, a deaf scholar, calls the inclusion of deaf professionals in every aspect of the decision-making process as it affects deaf students *Deaf Gain*. Bahan (2015) suggests that we do not focus on the difference in deaf and hard of hearing students in a way that indicates deafness is a deficiency. He asks: *What do people gain from being deaf?* He finds that deaf professionals can nurture the positive attributes of being deaf. Deaf professionals, as they work with deaf

infants, children, and young deaf adults, can illuminate the valued and treasured aspects of being deaf and show how these are embodied in everyday life.

There is a dire need for greater partnerships between decision makers who are hearing and professionals who are deaf on state and national levels. Deaf children, in

various stages of education, from early intervention to high school transition and graduation, can only profit from this partnership.

Deaf adults are a rich source of knowledge. They grew up being deaf or hard of hearing, sat in classrooms, learned how to read, write, and count; each confronted his or her own IEP. Every day they experience being deaf,

living in neighborhoods, working with colleagues in the workplace, attending houses of worship. They know what it is to explain and advocate for themselves. They sleep, breathe, eat, and think as deaf or hard of hearing people. Tapping into this lifetime of experience, knowledge, and expertise can ensure the next generation of deaf children achieves academically and receives greater opportunities.

The majority culture is sound-based; knowledge depends heavily on what is heard. Deaf people rely more on what they see so they can see how deaf students can navigate successfully and contribute in positive ways that are often invisible to hearing people. I, along with many deaf professionals across the country, offer experience and insights that can contribute to the next generation of deaf children. There's so much to gain when we—parents and professionals, hearing and deaf—attain the summit together.



## References

Bahan, B. (2015, September 25–27). *Deaf gain* [video presentation], Stanford University.

Douglas, E. (2011, May 24). Nawang Gombu obituary. *The Guardian*. Retrieved from <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/may/24/nawang-gombu-obituary>

Strickland, A. (2013, May 26). Everest men: On top of the world in 1963. Retrieved March 2016 from <http://www.cnn.com>

## Suggested Reading

Wording for the Senate Bill 103 as it passed into approved by the governor in 2014, [http://mgaleg.maryland.gov/2014RS/Chapters\\_non/CH\\_30\\_sb0103e.pdf](http://mgaleg.maryland.gov/2014RS/Chapters_non/CH_30_sb0103e.pdf)